

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

Lithuanians going peacefully about their business have been hearing a sound that Mikhail Gorbachev had been widely assumed to have silenced: the rattling of the Soviet saber. There is the crack of sonic booms as Soviet jets repeatedly buzz Vilnius, Lithuania's capital, at faster-than-sound speeds; there is the rumble of troop carriers as Soviet military units move about the city and the countryside on shadowy missions; and there is the tramp of boots as KGB security forces take up positions at customs offices, factories, and power plants.

All this is rather more serious than what we too sanguinely called it last week, "haggling over price." Despite its repeated statements that force will not be used, even Moscow doesn't seem to know what Moscow's ultimate response to the Lithuanians' assertion of independence will be. "Tanks will not help in this matter," conceded Yegor Ligachev, the Politburo's leading hard-liner. But he and his colleagues evidently believe that a bit of armor won't hurt, either. In what cannot be other than an effort to intimidate and threaten, they have already, after a fashion, sent in the tanks. Widespread military maneuvers on the soil of historic Lithuania, undertaken without warning, are reminding the locals that they court a confrontation with the terrifying force of Soviet armed might.

Nor has Moscow's immediate reaction to Lithuania's insistence on retrieving its independence been limited to symbolic evocations of what might be in store militarily. The routine civil life of Lithuanians is already being harassed in ways that are meant to make them feel isolated and alone. International telephone traffic, for example, has simply been cut off. Deliveries of industrial materials and of fuels have been demonstratively slowed; there are reports that some plants are already idle due to artificially contrived shortages. Instructions from Moscow to public enterprises and public offices forbid them to deal with Lithuanian authorities on the modalities of interstate relations. Such negotiations are the province, the Kremlin insists, of the Kremlin alone. At the same time, the Kremlin has made clear that such are precisely the negotiations it won't entertain.

When a Lithuanian delegate to the Congress of People's Deputies tried last week to explain why his people wanted independence, he was simply silenced by the shouting of fellow deputies. The question for Gorbachev, however, is not whether one Lithuanian can be beaten down but whether they all can be beaten down.

In its formal statement on what it continues to insist on calling "the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic," the Soviet government congratulates itself on "viewing with understanding problems of Lithuania's political, social, economic, national, and cultural development," and on "respecting the desire of its people to renew society and strengthen the republic's sovereignty." Gorbachev's problem is that what the Lithuanians have rightfully claimed is sovereignty itself, not some twilight half-sovereignty that can be "strengthened" at leisure. Their claim was as much as acknowledged by the Soviet government itself when, to general applause, it denounced the Stalin-Hitler pact that was the "legal" basis for the Baltics' colonization. Similar claims are sure to be advanced very soon not only by the other Baltic states but also by Georgia, by Moldavia, and eventually by the Ukraine, where nationalist political insurgents have just won a convincing victory in local elections.

The Soviet president's attitude toward these developments seems to veer back and forth between anger and resignation. If he gives way to anger he will destroy his own freedom along with the Lithuanians'. He would do well to reflect that he will have his hands full trying to manage his own country's transition to democratic politics and market economics. Perhaps he can manage that transformation and perhaps he cannot, but he surely cannot have it and empire too.